

Trinity University Digital Commons @ Trinity

English Faculty Research

English Department

Spring 2013

Expelled Once Again: The Fantasy of Living the Counterlife in Roth's *Nemesis*

Victoria Aarons

Trinity University, vaarons@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng_faculty



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Aarons, V. (2013). Expelled once again: The fantasy of living the counterlife in Roth's *Nemesis*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 9(1), 51-63.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.



Expelled Once Again: The Failure of the Fantasized Self in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*

Victoria Aarons

ABSTRACT. In *Nemesis* (2010) the misguided attempts to create and to live an anxiously figured counterlife turn catastrophic as Roth's Bucky Cantor, the Jewish warrior of the Weequahic playgrounds, attempts to step out of his life and reinvent himself. Here the art of impersonation is shown to be an impossible failure. For the deluded Bucky Cantor is inevitably stricken, not only with polio, but with the illusion that he can walk out of one life—the life bequeathed to him—and inhabit the lives of others. Roth shows the desire to live out the counterlife to be the ultimate self-delusion, exposing instead, as Zuckerman long ago suspected, the tragic certainty that, instead of the wishful fabrication of “turning what-was into what-wasn't or what-might-be into what-was—there was only the deadly earnest this-is-it of what-is.” In *Nemesis* Roth reveals the tragic impossibility of self-reinvention, exposing the ways in which his ill-fated protagonist is an heir to history in the making. Roth's Newark becomes the metaphorical point of connection of two menacing historical events: the devastating outbreak of polio running rampant throughout the city and the heightening peril of the Nazi assault on Europe's Jews. The language of the one evokes the reality of the other, the war haunting the course of the polio epidemic, an analogy exacerbated by palpably reactive American anti-Semitism.

In *The Counterlife* (1986) Nathan Zuckerman insists, with utter conviction, “There is no way around it: you enter history through my history and me” (370). A quarter century later, Bucky Cantor, the protagonist of Roth's *Nemesis* (2010), becomes, in the event of the 1944 polio epidemic, the unfortunate

heir to Zuckerman's lamentable prophecy. Indeed, Roth's relentless Zuckerman, who only takes a parting bow at the close of the 2007 novel *Exit Ghost*—"Gone for good" (292)—would seem, in many ways, to be a canny precursor for Roth's later characters, especially those protagonists of his recent novels, *Everyman* (2006), *Exit Ghost* (2007), *Indignation* (2008), *The Humbling* (2009), and *Nemesis* (2010). Upon reflection, Zuckerman might well be seen as a herald, forecasting a conception of character in which self-constituting performance becomes the inevitable means by which the invented "self" of the counterlife fails to convincingly simulate its own fantasized possibilities.

Curiously, the Nathan Zuckerman of *The Counterlife*, along with his phoenix-like, doggedly self-reinventing brother, Henry, sets the stage for the kinds of desperate self-fashioning that motivates Roth's recent fiction. The hyper-ironic gestures of identity played out in *The Counterlife* led Nathan Zuckerman to the unavoidable conclusion that, in the end, "one invents one's meanings, along with impersonating one's selves" (370). To this end, "[b]eing Zuckerman," indeed being anyone, "is one long" and often tiresome "performance" (365). To be sure, Roth's most recent works are counterlife novels whose characters imagine and, through a kind of magical thinking, attempt to recreate what might have happened, what they might have become had they lived other lives, other selves. The refrain "if only...if only...if only..." becomes a kind of mantra throughout these novels, reflecting not only the choices made by Roth's characters, but also opportunities squandered, responsibilities mislaid. Here the register of "if only" becomes a lengthening trail of all their mistakes, their failures, their misjudgments, and their impulsive, headlong gambles against fortune and inevitability. As the narrator of Roth's *Indignation* humorlessly confesses, "Yes, if only this and if only that, we'd all be together and alive forever and everything would work out fine" (229). But the self-admonishing "if only" comes, as it must, irrevocably too late. For, as *Nemesis*'s protagonist Bucky Cantor awakens to find, his headlong abandon of one existence for another is a delusion maintained only at great cost. He recognizes, only belatedly, "[t]he magnitude of what *he* had done" (229).

The art of impersonation that Roth ironically portrays in *The Counterlife*—peopled by characters who anxiously invent and reinvent themselves—shows itself here to be as fantastical as trying to alter the course of history. The playful capers of Nathan and Henry Zuckerman lose their self-parodic, comically exhibitionistic, and theatrical invitation to join in the carnival of selves. Here self-impersonation inverts itself: instead of providing a protective shield against the nakedly defensive self, the affective masquerade that symptomatically exposes the psychic center has now become the fearful and transgressive failure of character. As Bucky Cantor, his own worst enemy and most malignant imposter, shamefully realizes, not only are his failures solely his own, but of his own design: "the havoc that had been wrought [...] seemed to him not a malicious absurdity of nature but a great crime of his own, costing

him all he'd once possessed and wrecking his life" (273). Here Roth removes the mask of character from his earlier work. Like Simon Axler, his cohort in misery, Bucky comes to appreciate that all "the failures were his, as was the bewildering biography on which he was impaled" (*Humbling* 138). Instead of the "exchange of existences" that Henry Zuckerman gleefully embraces in *The Counterlife*, "the very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*," Bucky Cantor, Simon Axler, Marcus Messner and the other protagonists of Roth's recent fiction, despite their slippery self-defying attempts in death as in life to recreate themselves, find *only* and starkly themselves, a "rather small," as Nathan Zuckerman once allowed, "irreducible self" (156, 365, 366). The "joke of a self," as Zuckerman wearily acknowledges in *The Counterlife*, "a joke about *my* self," is here not so funny (366).

In Roth's recent work, and in *Nemesis* in particular, the misguided attempts to create and to live an anxiously figured counterlife turn catastrophic as Roth's Bucky Cantor, the Jewish warrior of the Weequahic playgrounds, attempts to step out of his life and reinvent himself. Here the art of impersonation is shown to be an impossible failure, an irredeemable act of hubris. For the deluded Bucky Cantor is inevitably stricken, not only with polio, but with the illusion that he can walk out of one life—the life bequeathed to him—and inhabit the lives of others. Here Roth shows the desire to live out the counterlife to be the ultimate self-delusion, exposing instead, as Zuckerman long ago suspected, the tragic certainty that, instead of the wishful fabrication of "turning what-was into what-wasn't or what-might-be into what-was—there was only the deadly earnest this-is-it of what-is" (*Counterlife* 38). Or as the daughter, Nancy, in Roth's novella *Everyman* admits with great finality, "There's no remaking reality. [...] Just take it as it comes. Hold your ground and take it as it comes" (5).

Holding his ground—both literally and figuratively—is, of course, what Bucky Cantor, in all his fanciful yearnings, cannot do. And so he tries to escape his well-honed sense of responsibility and better judgment, along with the sweltering heat and fear and invading plague that has advanced upon Newark, for the pastoral paradise of Indian Hill and the beckoning embrace of the Siren Marcia Steinberg. Marcia's "song"—"we could be together [...] and you'd be safe [...] a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity[...] we could be alone up here [...] finally, finally be alone"—temporarily seduces Bucky into thinking he can walk out of one history and into a self-determined future (85-87). He wants, that is, a transfer of lives, an exchange of identities, a passage from the virulent spread of polio and the attendant widening scope of fear, but also from the shackles of being Bucky: the motherless child of a ne'er-do-well father; the failed soldier, whose bad eyesight keeps him at home; the summer-time playground director of the Chancellor Avenue School, while his friends are fighting the war; the compensatory muscled javelin-thrower, "ashamed when he watched the newsreels of the war [...] ashamed when he took the

bus home to Newark from East Orange at the end of the school day and sat beside someone reading in the evening paper the day's biggest story—"Bataan Falls," "Corregidor Falls," "Wake Island Falls." He felt the shame of someone who might by himself have made a difference as the U.S. forces in the Pacific suffered one colossal defeat after another" (27). Bucky is ashamed most of all that he has already failed to measure up to the impossibly high standards of his resolute immigrant grandfather, whose staunch edict Bucky takes to heart: "to stand up for himself as a man and [...] as a Jew, and to understand that one's battles were never over and that, in the relentless skirmish that living is, 'when you have to pay the price, you pay it'" (25). But, of course, the "price," as measured by the onslaught of history and "the force of circumstance," is far more pernicious than either Bucky or his stalwart grandfather can fathom (153).

And, intrepidly, Bucky, "wearing thick eyeglasses [...] one of the few young men [...] who wasn't off fighting in the war [...] [standing] slightly under five feet five inches," attempts to remake himself (10-11). Bucky will try to be the good soldier that the conditions of his birth prevented him from realizing, making up for the one with sheer dint of will and temperament, fighting instead "the war being waged on the battlefield of his playground [...] fighting their fear of polio alongside his endangered boys" (173). Bucky will enlist in the battle, but the real antagonist will elude him. And it is exactly at the point of exhilaration, that reality-defying moment in which Bucky believes that he can reinvent himself and that his life—inadequate thus far—has taken the turn of desire that the false panacea of self-determination will extravagantly collapse in the face of the limitations of time, history, and character. For Bucky is ultimately proof that, no matter how hard you try, you can't leave yourself behind.

In *Nemesis*, Roth reveals the tragic impossibility of self-reinvention, exposing the ways in which his ill-fated protagonist is an heir to history in the making. Here, Roth shows the desire for self-fashioning to be motivated by fear—simple, unadorned, treacherous, and insidious—advancing much in the same way as the polio epidemic invading the city of Newark, "the terror of the unforeseen," to borrow a phrase from the novel *Plot Against America* (114). Yet here the terror, though unanticipated, is clearly in evidence, showing itself in the escalating dread and growing numbers of dead as the epidemic spirals out of control and as the war against the Jews in Europe heightens. And although Dr. Steinberg, Marcia's father and the paragon of prudence, will try to minimize the threat and quell the mounting fear, assuring Bucky that "the less fear the better," for "fear unmans us," "fear degrades us," this novel is all about fear, fear of others, fear of self, and the very real "terror of the unforeseen" that Bucky knows in his very bones is coming (106). In abandoning epidemic-stricken Newark for Edenic Indian Hill, Bucky "convert[s] tragedy into guilt" (265) and will be expelled from paradise, but not before he will enter into that which is forbidden, forbidden by the accidents of birth

and nature, upbringing and comportment. As the narrator of Roth's novel *Indignation* belatedly comes to realize, "the tiniest, littlest things *do* have tragic consequences" (14). But so, too, for Roth, do the big things.

Nemesis opens in "Equatorial Newark" in the summer of 1944, the exactitude of its setting suggesting at once a location situated in a specific time and place and thus contained there, but also existing in a kind of mythic time and place as well, out of real time. Such ambiguity and uncertainty create the apprehensiveness and dread that will lock the inhabitants of sweltering Newark into an ever-constricting "equatorial" circumference, squeezing and narrowing their world to exactly this: an oppressively hot, sultry, scorched landscape of heightened anxiety and fear, a landscape, like that of the equator, whose imaginary line will mark them as separate from any sort of relief. Indeed, Newark would seem here to be isolated, cut off, and dispossessed. Yet, in Roth's narrative, Newark also seems targeted, "the city [...] partially ringed by extensive wetlands [...] swarms of mosquitoes" (4). "Equatorial Newark" is the perfect location for the incubation of the virus, its humid, moist, yeasty fermentation providing a breeding ground for the seeds, not only of polio, but also the "germ of fear" about which Dr. Steinberg warns Bucky (38). Roth's attention to the climate—its oppressive, accelerating sultriness, stifling heat, and the canopied torpor that hangs over infested Newark—suggests the vulnerability of its inhabitants, especially Weequahic's Jews, to conditions rapidly spiraling out of their control. The mounting sense of isolation and defenselessness in the face of the contagion creates a kind of stasis in which Newark's Jewish community is poised, waiting for disaster to strike. The very climate itself is an antagonist. The "steamy," blistering, airless, and claustrophobic summer heat that afflicts the cityscape augurs the peril that will befall the Jews of "low-lying" Newark (4). Equatorial in its fictive centrality, Roth's Newark will become the metaphorical point of connection of two menacing historical events: the devastating outbreak of polio running rampant throughout the city and the heightening peril of the Nazi assault on Europe's Jews. Indeed, the language of the one evokes the reality of the other, the war haunting the course of the polio epidemic, an analogy exacerbated by palpably reactive American anti-Semitism.

But here, for Roth, the creeping spread of polio is analogous to more than the Nazi invasion of Europe, although, to be sure, the unfolding narrative of the epidemic as it malignantly advances upon Newark's population evokes the escalating fury of the Nazi assault on Europe's vulnerable Jewish communities. Even more suggestively, by aligning the language of the devastation of polio and the virulence with which it proceeds with the escalating horrors of the war, Roth both expands and localizes the idea of fascism and its social peril. Of course, it is significant that Roth situates the tension, not only in Newark, but in the Jewish section of the city. The polio outbreak, as Bucky fears, targets the families of his own neighborhood, an epidemic that, unchecked, will, as Bucky

puts it, "sweep through this place and destroy them all. Each morning [...] there'll be another few gone [...]. [I]n the end it's going to get every last child [...]. Not a one of the children will survive intact, if they survive at all" (114-15). Here Roth creates a sense of helplessness, a suspense born of witnessing retroactively the tragic misfortunes of an era, of seeing fate unfolding, all the while unable to avert the plummeting movement of a history that, even as we see it gather terrible momentum, has already occurred. And even Bucky's attempts to quell the mounting terror among his neighbors, cautioning them "to keep everything in their lives as normal as possible and [...] to try to stay reasonable and calm" (37), cannot discount the obvious: that reason is a poor contender against terror, nightmare, and madness.

Bucky's fear, to be sure, reflects the mounting fear of the community and portends the impending events to come. All the action in this novel is motivated and propelled by fear: fear of the spread of polio, fear of the unknown causes of the contagion, fear that exacerbates an already dark, deeply-rooted suspicion of others. Roth thus both localizes and historicizes fear, the fear of polio opening itself up to that other nemesis—the fear of worsening anti-Semitic fervor, the fear of segregation, of persecution, of, in short, the backward glance. For *Nemesis*, indeed, looks back. It situates itself in a shattering moment in time as viewed through the parallel lens of the onslaught of the disease. The scourge of polio and the wreckage left in its wake—both its life-altering and life-shattering consequences—change the course of history as well as the responsive making of individual histories, of individual self-fashioning. For Bucky, like so many others, is, finally, as the narrator of *Nemesis* accepts, "one of those people taken to pieces by his times" (274). But the novel, in reaching back in history, expands the threat of reiterative calamity. For Roth, in *Nemesis*, fear is not contained in time. Just as the polio epidemic, spent, exhausted by its own unrestrained ignition, retreats as insidiously and precipitously as it arose, so too might it reignite, the germ only incubating, waiting for the right conditions—like the psychological strangulations of fear and hatred—to present itself. In *Nemesis*, fear is both antagonist and portent, a measure of the times. And just as fear becomes the opening for the disaster to strike Weequahic's Jews and the unfortunate Bucky Cantor, it invokes the inexorable capture of Europe's Jews, a series of events already catastrophically in place, millions already dead.

And so, the summer of 1944 finds Newark positioned under an awning of impending doom. Seemingly untethered to its neighboring communities but anchored to the earth by fear, the city exists in a state of suspended animation, waiting for the disaster that will most certainly strike, the belated news of the progression of the disease, amplified by the relentless heat, causing "considerable apprehension [...] compounded by the fact that no medicine existed to treat the disease and no vaccine to produce immunity" (3). And even though, as the narrator tells us, "the chances of contracting polio were much reduced

from what they'd been back in 1916" (2), the dread of the disease looms large as a projection of encroaching menace to the already sequestered Jewish Weequahic section of the city. And, to be sure, Roth makes it very clear that contagion is both literal and metaphorical. The city begins to respond with ever increasing alarm to the spread of the disease, and, as Roth's narrator recounts, "[s]ince nobody then knew the source of the contagion, it was possible to grow suspicious of almost anything" (5). But "almost anything" inevitably focuses on the Jews, as Bucky's grandmother anxiously reports:

There are people [...] calling for a quarantine of the Weequahic section [...]. Barricading it off so nobody can go in or out [...]. People are up in arms. People are terrified [...]. The bus drivers on the eight and fourteen lines say they won't drive into the Weequahic section unless they have protective masks. Some say they won't drive in there at all. The mailmen don't want to deliver mail there. The truck drivers who transport supplies to the stores, to the groceries, to the gas stations, and so on don't want to go in either. Strangers drive through with their windows rolled up no matter how hot it is outside. The anti-Semites are saying that it's because they're Jews that polio spreads there. Because of all the Jews—that's why Weequahic is the center of the paralysis and why the Jews should be isolated. Some of them sound as if they think the best way to get rid of the polio epidemic would be to burn down Weequahic with all the Jews in it [...]. Out of their fear and out of their hatred [...] shutting down the playgrounds [...]. Movie theaters are shutting down [...]. The city pool is shutting down. The public library [...] is shutting down. (192-4)

Fear catalyzes the city, exposing its regressive impulses. And despite Dr. Steinberg's assurances to Bucky that "That was Europe, that's why Jews fled. This is America" (106), the all-too-familiar patterns of anti-Semitic scapegoating show themselves to know no geographical, political, or social bounds, the response of the city and its institutions utterly predictable, mirroring the progression of the Nazi plan to eradicate European—indeed, worldwide—Jewry: prohibition, quarantine, isolation, exclusion, ghettoization, and liquidation.

The initial prohibitions, a visceral response to fear, come from within. The narrator, Arnold Mesnikoff, who was one of Chancellor Avenue's playground boys afflicted by polio, describes the escalating situation: "as the number of cases steadily mounted in the city—and communal fear with it—many children in our neighborhood found themselves prohibited by their parents from using the big public pool [...], forbidden to go to the local 'air-cooled' movie theaters, and forbidden to take the bus downtown [...] warned not to use public toilets or public drinking fountains" (6). As the prohibitions mount in direct proportion to the brewing fear and panic and the growing numbers of victims in the Jewish neighborhoods, the ineffectiveness and reluctance of civic institutions to intervene and protect becomes all too predictably transparent. The uncomfortably haunting language of public outcry anticipates no deliverance: "The Board of Health does nothing! [...] What is the city doing to stop this? Nothing! There's got to be something to do—but they're not doing it" (36). In a series of analogous moves—the shutting down

of public gathering places, the segregating and tightening in of Weequahic's Jews, the aggregating and targeting of certain communities—Roth evokes Nazi Germany and the rise and implementation of fascism. But this is no simple analogy. Roth characteristically complicates the situation. While the language of contagion, in the Nazi era, was associated with Jews—carriers of disease, contaminated, plague-ridden, and infected—here, ominously, the Jews are both prey to disease, to the “germ of fear,” and preyed upon, the result of natural and human-made causes. The convergence of the polio epidemic and the particulars of the war against the Jews becomes an occasion for reckoning, suggestive of the ways in which the convolutions of crisis-stricken thought and action can become exercises in pathology. But also, for Roth, Jewish self-hatred, the deeply held suspicion harbored by Bucky that he deserves retribution, becomes an occasion for pathological masochism. In *Nemesis*, contagion is shown to parallel the language of fascist apology, but so too is fascism itself the contagion. In doubling the meaning of “contagion” in this way, Roth insinuates, as he did in *The Plot Against America*, that fascism can happen in America, all the while showing what it might look like if it does happen here. As Dr. Steinberg, with unwittingly false assurance, tells Bucky: “It’s a serious disease that’s been around all my life” (29). While *Nemesis* is all about fear, even irrational fear, it is also about the capacity for denial. And the conviction that the disease could be held at bay, contained, and that one could find a place beyond the tentacles of fear, and malice, and aggression, is implied by Roth to be, at best, dangerously wishful thinking.

In an unsettlingly evocative response to the growing numbers of victims, those who can afford to will attempt to spare their children by sending them out of the city and away from the fear and contagion that plagues their neighborhoods. Falsely believing in the talismanic properties of fresh air and cooler environs, Weequahic's Jews will place desperate optimism in the illusory promise of sanctuary from the malignant conditions that plague the city under siege, trusting in the long-held conviction that “escaping the city’s heat entirely and being sent off to a summer camp in the mountains or the countryside was considered a child’s best protection against catching polio” (7). And so Bucky, weary and disheartened by “the terrifying numbers charting the progress of a horrible disease [...] corresponding in their impact to the numbers of the dead, wounded, and missing in the real war,” flees against his better judgment “the persistent peril” of the city for the seductive tranquility of Indian Hill (131-32). But Roth shows believing in Indian Hill’s curative properties of “fresh mountain air purified of all contaminants [...] a rich moist green smell [...] [rising] from the rain-soaked earth,” and the “commingling of warmth and coolness,” the “unbounded space” of the sheltered and uncorrupted landscape, about as effective as having faith in an authorizing covenant of morality and decency (178-9). For even the bucolic camp Indian Hill, tucked away in the Poconos, where no one could begin to

imagine the presence of disease and death as it exists on the streets of Newark, is not exempt, not far enough away from the invasion of the disease. For it is here, despite Marcia's mistaken belief that "polio would never notice that there were kids in these woods—that it couldn't find them here," that Bucky and the others will be uncovered; the disease will aggressively, perniciously, "hunt them down," the language evoking the relentless Nazi pursuit of Jews in precarious hiding (229). Indeed, pastoral, serene Indian Hill, basking in "the rapturous intoxication of renewal," becomes all the more treacherous because of its insidious veneer of asylum (144). And to be sure, it is, ironically, at Indian Hill where Bucky, the camp's new waterfront director, will seal his fate.

For Indian Hill shows itself to be a false sanctuary, an Eden imaginable only in fantasy. Such a wished-for escape and a fantasized return to an invented, safe origin is, for the later Roth, impossible. In abandoning the sweltering city and, as he sees it, his unfeasible duty to protect his boys on the playground, Bucky desires an exchange of existences. He momentarily allows himself to play along in the fantasy that he can be reborn anew, the "joy of beginning again [...] the bursting feeling of 'I live! I live!'" (144). But such expressions of exhilaration are always deceptive in Roth's fiction. And Bucky's hoped-for rebirth as he abandons war-torn Newark—for, as he sees it, "this was real war too, a war of slaughter, ruin, waste, and damnation, war with the ravages of war"—is, not unexpectedly, ill-conceived from the start (132). In casting aside one existence for another, Bucky wills himself to believe, for a fleeting moment of profligate desire—a spendthrift at last—that he can leave his past behind and enact a self-exile in pursuit of a promised land. Bucky wants, in other words, to live a counterlife, a life that might have been his if only he were, incongruously, someone else. What Bucky wants, Roth ironically tells us, is impossibly simple and simply impossible: "the security and predictability and contentment of a normal life lived in normal times" (135). Indeed, the idea of such times taking place, as Roth's narrator admits, in a "decade when it seemed that the greatest menaces on earth were war, the atomic bomb, and polio" (244), are only normal in their fraught sense of the wildly unreserved and brazenly uncontrollable, egoistic vanity of twentieth-century life and thought. And Bucky, unluckily but predictably, can only live the life bequeathed to him, discovering "how powerless each of us is up against the force of circumstance" (153). As Roth has his narrator ironically concede, "Sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not. Any biography is chance, and, beginning at conception, chance—the tyranny of contingency—is everything" (242). And so Bucky's exaggerated sense of possibility and self-determination, as he steps off the precipice of judicious, cautious reasoning into the fantasy of starting over, of being granted a reprieve, becomes the site of his undoing.

Bucky becomes "un-done" at pastoral, idyllic Indian Hill, amid "the mild warmth of the sun—a sun that seemed benign and welcoming rather than

malevolent, a nurturing Father Sun, the good god of brightness to a fecund Mother Earth—and the flickering luster of the lake and the lush green mesh of July's growing things," because Roth wants to show this Eden to be a site of willed self-deception (149-50). In alluding to a god that Bucky knows can't be held responsible, indeed, in summoning a god against whom Bucky later will bring charges of complicity, capriciousness, and worse, Bucky will point to the ironic absurdity of his times and, in doing so, expose his naïve vulnerability and the impossibility of a fantasized since "irreclaimable homeland" (245): "And where does God figure in this? Why does He set one person down in Nazi-occupied Europe with a rifle in his hands and the other in the Indian Hill dining lodge in front of a plate of macaroni and cheese? Why does He place one Weequahic child in polio-ridden Newark for the summer and another in the splendid sanctuary of the Poconos?" (153). To punctuate the absurdity, Roth presents Indian Hill as an overdone pastoral, exaggerated in its life-affirming abundance and generosity. Indian Hill, upon whose grounds, even butterflies light on shoulders—"Miraculous!" marvels Bucky, "Fantastic! [...] What could be more salutary than that?" (180-81)—is hyperbolized, extreme, self-evidently too much. Indeed, its description exposes not only the extremity of its fantasy, but also its darker underbelly, its false promises. For not only does an ostensibly beneficent sun and expansive sense of possibility shine on the temporary inhabitants of Edenic Indian Hill, but it's a "sun [...] too brilliant, the weather too invigorating, the high excitement of the boys beginning their new day unfettered by fear too inspiring" (177). Roth wants us to see this site of escape as all too much. Its excessiveness and exaggerated natural riches—too lush, too green, too fruitful and bountiful, posing far too much of a contrast to the barren, diseased, tainted, inhospitable Newark streets, playgrounds, and tenements—shows its nature trope to be, in fact, unnatural, over-ripe, over-abundant, and thus vulnerable to the very conditions it resists. This is an Eden gone awry, Eden before the inevitable fall, all-the-more insidious because of its deceptive beauty, its lush, life-giving façade. Indeed, rather than existing in a tucked-away, canopied other world—a counter-existence—the camp is exposed to the destructive impulses that exist both in nature and without. For even here, "the roar of an airplane engine" will disturb the complacent serenity of the camp (209). In fact, the seeds of corruption are contained within its very landscape. For polio will find its way to Indian Hill, and Bucky, suspecting his complicity all along, will be exposed as the carrier. For his brazen impudence in momentarily thinking he escaped the disease, in believing himself to have dodged his history, for thinking that he could be someone other than Bucky Cantor, he will be expelled.

And so, when polio strikes the campers, as we all along know it must, Bucky, depleted, correctly assumes himself to be the carrier—"Who [...] if not me?" (224)—the negligent, neglectful, and irresponsible failure that he has always feared himself to be. Bucky, his own worst enemy, will come, tragi-

cally, to recognize in himself the seeds of his own undoing, seeing in himself someone who is dangerous, damaged, flawed, and thus to be shunned. Bucky, stricken not only by polio but, as Roth puts it, "demoralized by persistent shame" (246), recognizes all too cruelly that he has led a life of desperate impersonation. Having attempted all his life to do the "right thing," Bucky, in one rashly impulsive moment, will unmoor his own life as well as secure the unhappy destiny of others. As Bucky comes to know all too well, "You do only the right thing, the right thing and the right thing and the right thing, going back all the way. You try to be a thoughtful person, a reasonable person," only to lose courage in the face of fear and loss and covetous longing (47). What Bucky comes bitterly to acknowledge is something that most, if not all, of Roth's anxiously desirous protagonists lamentably discover: "there's no remaking reality" (*Everyman* 5). You can be Henry Zuckerman or Nathan Zuckerman, Alexander Portnoy, Micky Sabbath, Neil Klugman, Nathan Marx, Eli Peck, or the narrator of *Everyman*—the host of Roth's self-indulgent, deceitful, grasping, wary, exhausted, willful, exhibitionistic protagonists who people his fiction—and for whom, as Zuckerman maintains, "being in earnest is the act," but no one is exempt from the havoc of one's own character or his times (*Counterlife* 365). One can play it "right," but, after all, one is still playing, still performing on the stage of the self. And just like the narrator of Roth's *Everyman*, of whose own history "no one could say there wasn't enough sadness to go around or enough remorse to prompt the fugue of questions with which he attempted to defend the story of his life," all Roth's characters live fictions that need defending, "the kind of stories," as Nathan Zuckerman explains, "that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into" (*Everyman* 95; *Counterlife* 124). And so, too, not unlike Roth's *Everyman*, Bucky Cantor will be "assailed by remorse not just for this mistake but for all his mistakes," real or imagined, "all the ineradicable, stupid, inescapable mistakes—swept away by the misery of his limitations, yet acting as if life's every incomprehensible contingency were of his making" (*Everyman* 158). Bucky, the javelin throwing soldier of the playground, cannot, finally, slay the two-headed monster of his own fears and defenses. Nor can he save himself from the inevitable train wreck of his own life.

And so Bucky will rail against God, against God's injustice, against the God he knows to be capable of "such lunatic cruelty," a God who knows "no limits," a God who "spends too much time killing children" (75, 105, 260). Bucky's rather limited and all-too-expedient conception of God is, as the narrator disappointedly comes to see, yet another self-serving fantasy. God, obviously, is a projection of Bucky's anxiety and his abject surrender to it. Bucky not only summons God into existence, but gives him far too much credit in a fit of Rothian Job-inspired revision: "God the great criminal [...] an omnipotent being who was a union not of three persons in one Godhead, as in Christianity, but of two—a sick fuck and an evil genius" (264-65).

Bucky implicates God, holds God accountable, blames God, not for inaction, for turning aside in the face of disaster, but for intentional malice. God becomes "a fiend" for Bucky, an invoked counterpart in Bucky's fantasy of self-importance (264). For to do otherwise is to accept nameless, arbitrary chance as a cosmic principle, and such a surrender contradicts a miserable lifetime of experience, his own as well as the long history of Jewish suffering and expulsion. Bucky cannot give himself over to chance or to nature or to unchecked human iniquity. And here the twin nemeses of the novel converge, exposed in Bucky's fearful question: "how can a Jew pray to a god who has put a curse like this on [...] thousands and thousands of Jews?" (171). Roth shows Bucky's question to be a projection of the protagonist's own impotence and his refusal to face encroaching reality. Bucky will ask this theologically blasphemous question ironically before he is struck down. He thus evokes the theological question of the Shoah, one that skirts the question of human culpability: still mired in the fiction of the covenant and the collateral of reason, Bucky, "this maniac of the why," will align himself with God (265). Bucky's question also constitutes another kind of blasphemy: in Roth's fictive worlds, the invocation of God as an answer to the question "why?" constitutes an unacceptable idolatry because it avoids the human culpability in evil. If Bucky can't be a savior, then he will be a destroyer. And what God won't do to him, the Job-like Bucky will impose upon himself. He will be expelled from Eden, will contract polio, and will be crippled for life. But the real punishment Bucky will dispense himself. As the disheartened narrator explains, "[t]he only way to save a remnant of his honor was in denying himself everything he had ever wanted for himself—should he be weak enough to do otherwise, he would suffer his final defeat" (262). Unlike Cain, who is cast out by God, Roth's Bucky will cast himself out and sentence himself to uneasy wandering, bereft of the embrace of others. Bucky, robbed of his once-potent athleticism, will punitively deny himself the security of family, home, and the new life that he always desired, that he outrageously imagined he could will into being.

Typically, for Roth, the worst judgment is imposed by oneself on oneself; self-judgment consistently castigates Roth's characters, and, as Marcus Messner, the protagonist of Roth's *Indignation*, discovers, this is as true in life as in death, where "the judgment is endless, though not because some deity judges you, but because your actions are naggingly being judged for all time by yourself" (56-57). In an act of transferential defiance, Bucky will turn against himself. He will impose upon himself the conditions of his own failure. He will beat God and history at their own game; he will win at this misery-making business, for, after all, Bucky has had plenty of preparation for what it means to suffer, for what it means to be a Jew, "not from doubtful biblical evidence but from irrefutable historical proof, gleaned during a lifetime passed on this planet in the middle of the twentieth century" (264).

WORKS CITED

- Roth, Philip. *The Counterlife*. 1986. New York: Farrar, 1988. Print.
- . *Everyman*. Boston: Houghton, 2006. Print.
- . *Exit Ghost*. Boston: Houghton, 2007. Print.
- . *Indignation*. Boston: Houghton, 2008. Print.
- . *Nemesis*. Boston: Houghton, 2010. Print.
- . *The Plot Against America*. Boston: Houghton, 2004. Print.

Copyright of Philip Roth Studies is the property of Purdue University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.